

The logo for Beehive Middle East Social Media features the word "Beehive" in a stylized font. The "B" is large and red, while the "eehive" is in a teal color. A blue orbital path with a red dot at its center loops around the "ee". Below "Beehive" is the text "Middle East Social Media" in a teal sans-serif font. In the top right corner, there is a logo for Tel Aviv University and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), which includes a stylized building icon and the text "TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY" and "The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies".

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Mercenary Fighters in Libya and Ukraine: How Social Media Are Exposing the Russian Wagner Group

Biancamaria Vallortigara*

On 20 March 2022, almost a month after Russia launched its full-scale strike on Ukraine, the official Facebook page of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine published a post claiming Libyan General Khalifa Haftar's involvement in the conflict.

According to this post, which widely circulated on other social media platforms, Libyan "volunteers" would be deployed to Ukraine for supporting the Russian

* Biancamaria Vallortigara is a doctoral candidate in the Zvi Yaavetz School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University. She currently serves as the Editorial Assistant for *Bustan: Middle East Book Review*, produced by the Moshe Dayan Center and published by Penn State University Press. Her research interests include history of the Middle East and contemporary history and politics of Libya.

Federation, following an agreement reached during the latest visit of the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA) to Moscow.¹



Screenshot from the Twitter account of the Ukrainian newspaper [Kyiv Independent](#) announcing the agreement reached between Russia and Libya's Khalifa Haftar on the recruiting of mercenaries.

The LNA promptly denied the allegations. Major General Khaled Mahjoub, the LNA Director of the Moral Guidance Department, stated that his forces “have nothing to do whatsoever with the Ukrainian war” and that the LNA is currently engaged in combating terrorism and mafia organizations involved in human trafficking, especially on Libya’s southern border.²

According to the accusations advanced by Ukraine, these volunteers would be members of the Russian private military company “Wagner”.

The Wagner group has gained popularity over the past eight years, because of its involvement in international conflicts and support for Russia’s geopolitical, military, and economic interests.³ Although it is not listed as a private security

¹ [@Generalstaffua](#), Facebook, 20 March 2022; accessed 25 April 2022.

² “[LNA denies Kyiv's allegation of sending mercenaries to Ukraine](#)”, *The Libya Update*, 21 March 2022; accessed 28 April 2022.

³ Miriam Berger, “[What is the Wagner Group, the Russian mercenary entity in Ukraine?](#)” *The Washington Post*, 9 April 2022; accessed 1 May 2022.

company, the Wagner group has been operating as a para-military network employing an estimate of 1000 to 5000 fighters.⁴

The nature of the organization is rather opaque, and despite its seemingly private status, the company's management and operations are deeply intertwined with Russia's military and intelligence community.⁵ Without an official leadership, it has been linked to the Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin.⁶

Since 2014, the Wagner Group has created two training camps in Russia⁷ and has been suspected to operate in as many as 30 different countries,⁸ including, *inter alia*, Ukraine, Libya and Syria.⁹

The Wagner Group's activities in Ukraine date back to 2014, when the company became involved in the training and organization of Russian-backed militias fighting for the control of the Donbas region.¹⁰ Moreover, the Wagner operatives also took part in field fighting and intelligence gathering, thus ostensibly playing an active role in Russia's unlawful annexation of Crimea.¹¹

Colonel Adel Abdel-Kafi claimed that in the second half of March, out of the 2200 Wagner paramilitaries operating in Libya, around 1300 were withdrawn by Russia, while the remaining 900 are deployed along a highway linking the areas of Sirte and Jafra in central Libya.¹²

⁴ Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catria Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, "[Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies](#)", CSIS (Center for Strategic & International Studies), September 2020; accessed 1 May 2022.

⁵ Amy Mackinnon, "[Russia's Wagner Group Doesn't Actually Exist](#)", *Foreign Policy*, 6 July 2021; accessed 1 May 2022.

⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "[Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity](#)", Press Release of 15 July 2020; accessed 1 May 2022.

⁷ Miriam Berger, *op. cit.*

⁸ According to the CSIS, the complete list of countries includes: Ukraine, Serbia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Senegal, Mali, Nigeria, Guinea Bissau, Chad, Sudan, Yemen, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Mozambique, Comoros, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Eswatini, South Africa, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Venezuela, see Brian Katz *et al.*, *op. cit.*

⁹ "[IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics](#)", *The Soufan Center*, 21 April 2022; accessed 1 May 2022.

¹⁰ "[Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine](#)", *The Soufan Center Special Report*, 4 April 2022; accessed 2 May 2022.

¹¹ Brian Katz, *et al.*, *op. cit.*

¹² Mohammed Erteima, "[1,300 Wagner mercenaries sent from Libya to help Russian forces in Ukraine](#)", *Anadolu Agency*, 25 March 2022; accessed 25 April 2022. See also, "[Russia's Wagner Group withdraws fighters in Libya to fight in Ukraine](#)", *Middle East Monitor*, 26 March 2022; accessed 11 May 2022.

Moreover, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND), Germany's foreign intelligence service, has acquired in April new evidence on the atrocities committed by Russian military forces during the fighting in Bucha, including the involvement of the Wagner fighters.¹³

General Haftar sought to refute the allegations regarding Libyan soldiers fighting in Ukraine. However, several pictures circulated online,¹⁴ showing dead bodies of Wagner mercenaries of North African and Middle East origin.¹⁵ Through its social media channels, the Ukrainian military has posted images of Libyan and Syrian IDs, shopping receipts, and currency allegedly collected by Ukrainian soldiers from the scene.¹⁶

The Wagner men joined the forces of General Khalifa Haftar in 2019 in the attempt to overthrow Libya's UN-backed government, set up in 2015 to end the country's civil war.¹⁷ Although the invasion of Tripoli failed, the role played by the Wagner fighters cannot be underestimated: because of their persistent firepower, the lethal sniper-shots, and human rights' abuses,¹⁸ they have perpetuated and fueled the conflict.

Currently, in Ukraine, the battlefield is incredibly complex, with private military contractors, foreign fighters, extremists, and terrorist groups.¹⁹ The introduction of non-state actors like Wagner into the battlefield further aggravates the situation, especially considering their destabilizing activities,²⁰ and for certain it is not a good omen for the outcome of the war.

¹³ Melanie Amann, Matthias Gebauer and Fidelius Schmid, "[Possible Evidence of Russian Atrocities: German Intelligence Intercepts Radio Traffic Discussing the Murder of Civilians in Bucha](#)", *Spiegel International*, 7 April 2022; accessed 28 April 2022.

¹⁴ "[10 Libyans from the Russian Wagner PMC killed by Ukrainian soldiers in Popasna](#)", *Censor.NET*, 20 April 2022; accessed 25 April 2022.

¹⁵ According to the source, the Wagner Group is increasingly relying on fighters from African nations and continues to recruit people from Mali, Chad and Sudan; see, Mohammed Erteima, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Stefan Korshak, "[Ukrainian officials: Dozens of RF mercenaries from Libya, Syria, Russia killed in Popasna attacks](#)", *Kyiv Post*, 21 April 2022; accessed 11 May 2022.

¹⁷ Frederic Wehrey, "[Putin Is Deploying Mercenaries in Ukraine That Terrorized Libyans](#)", *Time*, 18 April 2022; accessed 25 April 2022.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Robin Wright, "[Will Mercenaries and Foreign Fighters Change the Course of Ukraine's War?](#)" *The New Yorker*, 5 April 2022; accessed 25 April 2022.

²⁰ Miriam Berger, *op. cit.*

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